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Special Olympics coaching, training, and learning: a case study of a Canadian cross-country skier and coach

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Abstract

This paper reviews the history of the Special Olympics and its structure in Canada. It then examines the functions and needs of volunteers, especially coaches, who are working with the Special Olympics by referencing the development of two informants: a Canadian Special Olympics Nordic skier and his volunteer coach. Those informants act as case studies of the goals, needs, motivations, and experiences of Special Olympic participants. Though the formal structure of the Special Olympics may vary from country to country, it is viewed that the development and experiences of athletes and coaches may be similar regardless of nationality.

Key Words: *Special Olympics; coaching; intellectual disability; volunteering*

Rationale

With the current buildup to and emphasis on the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games throughout Japan, as well as the controversies over illegal performance enhancement, dominating the news media, little attention has been given to another branch of the IOC (International Olympic Organization): the Special Olympics. Considering that the 2020 tournaments celebrate elite sport achievement whereas the Special Olympics focus on athletic and social inclusion, it is perhaps not surprising that the Special Olympics are largely ignored by the media and society at large. Yet, in many ways the Special Olympics are closer to the true founding spirit of the Olympic movement than their more celebrated Olympic and Paralympic Games: sport for enjoyment and participation, rather than sport for national and individual ranking.

Historical Background

In the 1950s and 1960s Eunice Kennedy Shriver, a sister of the American President John F. Kennedy, noticed that children with intellectual (also termed developmental) disabilities seldom had opportunities to play as they grew up, both because of discrimination and lack of available facilities. So Shriver began to hold summer day camps in her own backyard for children with intellectual disabilities. The idea was to focus on what these children were capable of doing, rather than on what they could not do.

In time, her local idea spread throughout North America and then gradually around the world. While many people had become aware of the athletic needs and skills of people with physical disabilities (e.g., deafness or mobility issues), these athletes were being served by the Paralympics. However, those with intellectual disabilities tend to have different needs and physical skills; hence, a separate sport and fitness regimen was deemed to be needed. The Special Olympic movement came from that drive and motivation.

The first international Special Olympics was held in 1968 in Chicago, USA, led by Shriver and her husband Sargent Shriver with 26 US states and Canada participating in track and field and swimming events. In 1977 the first international Special Olympics Winter Games were added, with 500 athletes competing in skiing and skating events.

It wasn't until 1988, twenty years after the first international Special Olympics were held that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) granted full Olympic status to the Special Olympics movement. Since then, however, the Special Olympics organizations have gone from strength to strength. Currently there are 170 countries throughout the world involved with 1.2 million

athletes participating, supported by many charitable organizations and hundreds of thousands of volunteers. The majority of these athletes are involved at a non-competitive recreational level, while others are highly competitive.

There are 26 countries from the Asia-Pacific region active in the Special Olympics movement. In Japan at the last count there were 7835 athletes and 4656 coaches, sponsored by about 200 businesses. Led by its current Global Ambassador footballer Hidetoshi Nakata, Special Olympics Japan is an active organization with strong local support. Headquartered in Tokyo's Nishi-Shinbashi, Japan is involved in 23 Special Olympic sports.

Intellectual Disability

The American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) explains the term "intellectual disability" as follows:

> *Intellectual disability is a disability characterized by significant limitations in both* ***intellectual functioning*** *and in* ***adaptive behavior****, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18.*
>
> *…Intellectual functioning—also called intelligence—refers to general mental capacity, such as learning, reasoning, problem solving, and so on.*
>
> *…Adaptive behavior is the collection of conceptual, social, and practical skills that are learned and performed by people in their everyday lives.*
> - ✓ *Conceptual skills—language and literacy; money, time, and number concepts; and self-direction.*
> - ✓ *Social skills—interpersonal skills, social responsibility, self-esteem, gullibility, naïveté (i.e., wariness), social problem solving, and the ability to follow rules/obey laws and to avoid being victimized.*
> - ✓ *Practical skills—activities of daily living (personal care), occupational skills, healthcare, travel/transportation, schedules/routines, safety, use of money, use of the telephone.*

As the foregoing description implies, there are many complex issues affecting people with this form of disability. As a consequence, sport is not merely a physical activity but also a behavioural challenge for many people with intellectual disabilities. People engaged in the Paralympics have to deal with their own physical strengths and weaknesses; those with intellectual disabilities may not behave in a normal way while engaged in the activity: Special Olympics Ontario Nordic ski coach

Rosalind Riseborough* notes, *"As a coach, you have to expect surprises. For instance, I observed a swimmer in a competitive race who stopped in the middle of the pool and did a handstand. She didn't even understand what a race was!"*

Typical children pass through several play developmental stages in the first three years of life. Initially, they play in *observant* mode, sitting and watching others play or act but not doing anything themselves. Then they move into a *solitary* mode – learning by self-exploration of objects and the world around them mainly through sensual experiences. By the age of 2 or 3 years, they begin to play with others around them, yet largely engage in *parallel* play – playing independently with toys but enjoying having children around them. After this period, children begin *associative* play in which they notice others more, copy their behaviours, but still tend to play by themselves. In the final *cooperative* stage of play

*All quotes listed without citation are by the coach informant, Rosalind Riseborough.

development, usually at age 3 or 4 years, they begin to share play activities with others, talking and working together imaginatively. As they interact more with others, they "learn to compromise and will seek help from adults to resolve conflicts" (Miller, 2014).

People with intellectual disabilities, however, may not have fully developed their cooperative social skills, regardless of their ages, physical skills, and experiences. For this reason, participation in or coaching of Special Olympics sport may be a challenging and at times frustrating endeavour.

Figure 1: Coach Rosalind and her son Jake in Nordic ski training

As a result, one of the more important requirements for a Special Olympics participant is to agree to follow an athletic Code of Conduct. This code lists necessary behaviours such as respect for others, avoidance of dangerous or violent actions, avoidance of swearing or rude language, cooperation with coach directives, regular attendance, and so on. Athletes who fail to fulfill these requirements may be suspended or banned from participation at the coach's discretion.

People with intellectual disabilities may have the same motivations as the abled: "*Athletes participate for a number of reasons – to have fun, experience joy, physical fitness, make friends, share their unique gifts, improve skills, feel a sense of accomplishment, and experience success.*"

Adapted Sports

In order to make various sports accessible to people with developmental disabilities, there have been some changes made to the ways in which they are carried out. These changed sports are termed **Adapted** or **Adaptive Sports**, and are informed by three types of possible changes: Divisioning, Rule Changes. and Unified Sports.

Divisioning is a system that allows athletes with a similar level of ability to compete with each other. Before a competition, coaches submit their team's or individual athletes' top or best scores from recent measurements. If there are enough athletes with similar scores (generally within a 25% range), they are divided into separate male and female divisions, generally also in age groups. Nevertheless, some events may be mixed in gender or age if insufficient athletes are available for the competition. Each division or section comprises between 3 and 7 individuals or teams. Yet if there is only one person in a division, the competitor must compete against their own best score submitted by their coach before the competition: "*Jake was the only racer in his age group in the 500m at the Provincial race. He skied 30 seconds slower than the time his coach had submitted as his qualifying time. He won a silver medal. If he had skied faster, he would have won a gold.*"

Competitions have lots of divisions, so as to produce lots of medals – which in turn results in an abundance of confidence and happiness for the competitors.

Various *Rule Changes* such as shortened time periods or distances for competitions may be employed in different sports in order to accommodate the intellectual disabilities of the athletes.

A recent addition to the Special Olympics, *Unified Sports* involve having abled athletes compete on the same team as Special Olympic athletes. The affected sports may be either team sports such as basketball or individual sports such as running. In some events the abled and disabled

competitors compete separately, then have their results combined. In other events, they may be competing together in the field at the same time. The partnerships these teams form contribute to skill development, friendship, and motivation. Unified Sport is particularly strong in the USA, but is gradually expanding to other countries.

Levels

In Canada there are four levels of Special Olympics activities: Local, Regional / Invitational, National, and International. Invitational events are generally at the local level, and may be either competitive or non-competitive (recreational or for fitness). Selected competitive athletes may represent local areas at the Regional (Provincial) competitions. Afterwards, each province and territory creates a team to compete in the National Games. At the most recent Canadian National Special Olympics Winter Games in February-March, 2016, about 960 athletes representing provincial and territorial teams competed. Then, a national team is chosen for the World Games. At the upcoming World Winter Games in Austria in 2017, more than 7000 athletes are expected to compete.

Regardless of their abilities, athletes at the local level – where many events are just scrimmages and casual competitions – can try to compete at a higher level if they so wish. Qualification trials are usually held for a single day and those selected can then compete in the regional competitions.

At these and all upper level competitions, each competitor must recite the Special Olympics Athletes' Oath, which is believed to help athletes with commitment and sincerity towards their chosen competition and sport:

> ***"Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."***
>
> (specialolympics.org)

Special Olympics Ontario, in which Jake Riseborough is an active athlete, is comprised of more than 19,000 athletes and 9,000 volunteers. Athletes participate in 18 sports divided into three seasons: Spring Sports, Summer Sports, and Winter Sports. Top competitive athletes compete in a selection of these sports at the national games held every four years. At the 2016 Winter Games there were 186 athletes, 56 coaches, and 14 team managers.

Volunteering

There is a significant need for volunteers in the operation of Special Olympic activities. Naturally

the athletes require coaches, trainers, event managers, sport facility staff, and so on. However, due to their nature of their disability, a large number of other volunteers are necessary – ranging from drivers, caterers, and guides to emotional supporters such as family, friends, and counselors. For instance, because many of these athletes cannot manage money or travel planning well, or have short-term memory difficulties, they need to have volunteer staff to take care of or monitor such arrangements. For these reasons, being such a volunteer is not always easy: patience is essential.

However, because of their developmental disabilities the athletes are particularly vulnerable to exploitation by the abled. For example, it is not unknown for female Special Olympic athletes to be victims of sexual harassment or worse, since they may be viewed as "easy targets." Hence, "*Like the athletes, the volunteers have a code of conduct: being respectful, providing a safe environment, giving appropriate practices, and so on.*"

As a consequence, in Canada all volunteers and coaches must have a police check before they are permitted to be involved with Special Olympic activities. This is deemed necessary because athletes range between 8 and 100 years of age, yet all have intellectual disabilities and hence may trust unwisely.

This leads to the question: what kinds of people can be volunteers in the Special Olympics? Essentially, they must be "nice" adults or youth adults, the kinds of people anyone might want to be friends or work with: "*Volunteers can be parents, filling in a need so that their children can participate (as in my case); they can be students (in Canada, high school students are supposed to volunteer somewhere for 40 hours before graduating) ; they can be retired people who want to help out in the community; or they can be athletes and former athletes.*"

All volunteers can benefit from attention to the social skills of customer service workers in general, some of which include:

・Being a good listener
・Having effective communication skills
・Being calm and having patience
・Keeping promises
・Being honest
・Caring for customer satisfaction and happiness
・Employing positive and friendly body language
・Becoming a knowledge expert
・Being adaptable to deal with surprises

・Using positive language
・Learning from mistakes
・Being friendly and compassionate

(Adapted from Customer Service Heroes 2013)

Despite the challenges of working with people with developmental disabilities, volunteering is often not a one-way benefit:

> *Volunteering with Special Olympics can be very rewarding. Not only can you help the athletes develop skills in a sport, but you can also help them gain life and social skills. You can witness their joy in feeling successful. You can give them a reason to turn off the TV or video games and become active and fit. [Moreover,] you yourself can learn tolerance and patience, and often develop a good sense of humour.*

Reports from many Special Olympic volunteers inform that the joyful smiles of the athletes are shared by the volunteers – in fact, much more often than in competitions with abled athletes. In effect, involvement in the Special Olympics can improve the overall quality of life for its volunteers.

Coaching

Although there are many volunteer parent coaches without formal training at the Local level, there are many opportunities for coaching skill development. Coaches are encouraged by their respective Special Olympic organizations to attend at least some of these coaching clinics:

> *To coach and attend the competitions, volunteers can take coaching courses. These are a mix of basic community coaching and courses focussed on Special Olympics athletes. These courses help the coaches learn about the various medical conditions and syndromes the athletes may have – Down syndrome, Aspergers, deafness, partial paralysis, schizophrenia, etc. – and give the coaches suggestions about how to deal with issues that might arise, and even how to design a practice.*
> *…To attend higher level competitions, coaches would need to take more advanced courses, but would also need to gain experience by attending lower level competitions first.*

Local Level

The local level of the Special Olympics contains the greatest variety and numbers of participant,

since many are involved solely for fun, fitness, and/or friendship rather than competitive spirit. Therefore, it is at the local level that the majority of coaching volunteers are needed and where the most contact is made between coach and athlete.

The number of volunteers needed depends on the sport. Typically, a 5:1 ratio between athletes and coach exists. For Nordic skiing, however, the ratio is 3:1, because the skiers can easily move farther away from safety during training or events.

All sports at this level use Club Names to promote team spirit, such as Rip Tides, Gladiators, Striders, and so on. Athletes practice and compete with others of a similar skill level. In team sports like soccer and basketball there are usually at least two different groups:

1. Adapt Team: for beginners and people with a lower level of skill
2. A, B, C Teams: for more advanced players at progressively higher skill levels

Adapt teams play against each other and might have some training drills built into their program. The A teams play each other, as do the B and C teams.

Representative Levels

As serious competitors qualify for Regional or higher levels of competition, they have to make greater commitments to their sport. This is because they may be training with a smaller group of athletes and may spend more time away from their homes and families due to increased training and coaching: "*Mike, one of the Canadian national skiers, is from our home town. He has ski training three times a week, but also goes running and biking every week. He had to sign a contract promising commitment to his training program before he was selected for the national team.*"

There is stiff competition to qualify for the National Team going to the World Games. For instance, out of the more than 70 Nordic skiers at the National Games only 12 Canadian athletes will be selected for the next World Games in Austria in 2017.

Jake Riseborough: Athletic Development

Jake Riseborough, 27, was born with special needs, having delayed development intellectually and physically. Fortunately for him, his family is active and has an outdoor recreation orientation – enjoying camping, hiking, canoeing, and cross-country skiing. These pursuits are helping him with his developmental issues.

When he was quite young, his teachers started to notice that his size and skill level did not

Figure 2: Jake of Team Ontario at the 2016 Canadian National Winter Games

match other children of his age. Though he was placed in Special Education programs at school, whenever possible he was integrated into normal classes. This system was extended into local community recreation: he played T-Ball (a simplified form of baseball) and other sports where the emphasis was on having fun and developing physical coordination. As a result, though other children progressed faster than him, he was still having fun.

Eventually, Jake was introduced to the Special Olympics, starting with soccer at the age of 12, then gradually getting involved in several other sports: *Special Olympics – School told us about this organization for people with intellectual disabilities. Many have some form of physical issue, but it is not the same as the Paralympics. For some athletes, Special Olympics becomes one of the main activities in their lives."*

Due to the Special Olympic movement's sensitivity towards intellectual disability, Jake quickly felt happy and comfortable in its activities. Even sport organizations which were less involved in Special Olympic activities made special participatory arrangements on Jake's behalf. The local ski club, for example, provided him with extra helpers and ski classes that matched his ski level. They also introduced a "Cookie Race" in which everyone receives a cookie on a ribbon when they finish a race as a reward and symbol of fun. At school there were also city-wide competitions in such sports as track and field and swimming for children with special needs, with every competitor receiving at least a participation ribbon. (Interestingly, this ribbon motivational idea has now been

Figure 3: Jake playing T-Ball as a young child.

copied by regular elementary schools in many countries including Japan.)

Currently, Jake does Nordic skiing and indoor soccer in winter, outdoor soccer in summer, as well as track and field, swimming, bowling, and basketball. It is a full recreational sport program that helps him with his confidence, fitness, and enjoyment of life. Consequently, he intends to continue with sport for the foreseeable future.

Potential Problems

Despite all these positives, participants in Special Olympic sports can have problems from time to time. Commonly, an athlete may have anger management problems which can make trouble for coaches and other athletes. Jake notes, *"It's sometimes hard to get along with other athletes. They don't always cooperate!"* Furthermore, individuals may have quirks or socialization issues that need addressing. In Jake's case, he is very interested in food and cooking, so is quite selective about the food he eats. He complains, "*The food isn't always good [at a tournament].*" To alleviate this problem, his mother often provides special snacks or food for him during training or competition.

Naturally, another frequent complaint from participants is related to the training requirements. Since many of the Special Olympic athletes are not inherently "athletic," they can be easily discouraged or indifferent to formal training drills. Instead, they may be more interested in scrimmages or play than in fitness or skill training. During or after training, Jake says, "*Sometimes I'm really really tired!*"

Due to the nature of their disabilities, Special Olympic athletes are sometimes unwilling or unable to discuss any physical problems they face. For instance, other than Jake complaining about sore feet from time to time, his mother discovered only recently that he had been suffering a stress fracture on one of his feet for a couple of years. Since the treatment and recovery is taking some time, unfortunately he had to withdraw from some events at the last minute at the National Games in February 2016. His mother commented ruefully, *"I became a coach so I could look after my son at the National Games, but he wasn't even competing!"* Luckily, he was still able to compete in three shorter ski races, receiving a gold medal and two silvers for his efforts.

Another problematic issue may be emotional or social inhibitions that interfere with normal communication. Jake appears to be comfortable standing in front of an audience and fielding questions. When praised about this, he observed, *"It doesn't bother me. But some of my friends just turn their back when someone asks them a question!"*

Conclusion

With this brief review of the Special Olympics and a look at two informant participants (coach and athlete), it is hoped that readers will have a better understanding of the movement and its strengths. These days, people with disability – whatever theirs is – might say something like, "I am not different. I have a difference, that's all." This is why now we use the term *person with disability* rather than "disabled person." We need to recognize the 'People First' concept, which is central to the Special Olympics movement.

Wayne Goldsmith (2010) in an article aimed at parents of young athletes makes two points that are pertinent to Special Olympic activities as much as for those of the abled:

> *Accept flat spots. Times when your child does not improve. During these times encourage participation for fun, focus on learning skills and help them develop perseverance and patience – two life skills that will help them throughout their lives.*
>
> *… Don't compare the achievements of your kids to any other kids – good or bad. It only creates barriers and resentments between young people and the world can do without more of that!*

The Special Olympics are the embodiment of these recommendations, and for that they deserve more public praise and support. It would be difficult to find any organization that is more deserving of a Nobel Peace Prize for its contribution to social justice, integration, and promotion of

happiness than the Special Olympics.

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ottawa.specialolympicsontario.ca（Special Olympics Ottawa）
son-or.jp（Special Olympics Japan）

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スペシャルオリンピックコーチング、トレーニングと学習:カナディアンクロスカンリースキーヤーとコーチのケーススタディ

Nicholas Lambert

要旨

本論文は、カナダにおけるスペシャルオリンピックの歴史とその構造について報告する。 特に、スペシャルオリンピックにおいてボランティアコーチの機能や必要性に焦点をあてて報告する。調査の方法はノルディックスキーヤーとその選手のボランティアコーチの２人に対するインタビュー方式とした。本論文はスペシャルオリンピック参加者としての目標、必要性、モティベーションや経験についてインタビューから明らかにしたケーススタディである。まとめとして、スペシャルオリンピックの形式的な構造は国によってかなり異なる可能性が高いが、選手とコーチが向上していく過程や経験は国には関係なく類似していることが示唆された。

キーワード：スペシャルオリンピック　コーチング　知的障害　ボランティア